

## *Plain Language: The Art of the Message*

# Overuse of Bureaucratic Lingo Ongoing Challenge for Government

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**(EDITOR'S NOTE:** Business communications has never been more complicated - Cell phones, video conferencing, e-mails, web content, correspondence, reports and presentations cause even the greatest writer or orator stir with apprehension that their message is clearly understood. Each month this column will explore the many different ways each of us can learn to communicate more plainly.)

Ever get a letter in the mail or an email in your inbox from a government agency that just makes you scratch your head in confusion? You end up reading the message three times and showing it to friends or co-workers to help you decipher it, only to eventually throw up your hands and take your best guess about what the "sender" wants you to know or do? You might even think to yourself that the message must not be THAT important if the government agency that created it couldn't take the time to make sure that it is easily understood by the public.

The good news is, according to recent well-publicized research, brainteasers and puzzles can help ward off memory loss, and figuring out exactly what this government agency is trying to communicate is certainly a brain teaser sometimes! However, we would all probably rather get our daily dose of "brain exercising" from the crossword puzzle in the newspaper or watching Wheel of Fortune reruns.

Since KDHE is a government agency itself, maybe a few of us have actually authored some of these cryptic letters and e-mails that have frustrated our partners and the public. Not on purpose, of course. We are just doing our jobs, right? Weren't we all taught in school to demonstrate our vast knowledge by using big words and impressive concepts in our communication? If we do that, then the target audience will know how smart we are and that we really are experts on any and all things related to health and environment. Unfortunately, that's not exactly how it works.

Recently, I ran across an interesting Web site dedicated to this very topic called *Plain Language: Improving Communication from the Federal Government to the Public* ([www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)). I was impressed to learn that at least a few people working for our federal government recognize how burdensome government-ese, bureaucratic-speak and biz-lingo is for the public to understand. This Web site is dedicated to promoting the use of plain language in government communication.

What is plain language? There are several definitions on the Web site. My favorite happens to be: language that reflects the interests and needs of the reader and consumer rather than the legal, bureaucratic, or technological interests of the writer or of the organization the writer represents.

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Proponents of plain language argue its use has many tangible benefits, including:

- Readers understand documents better
- Readers prefer plain language
- Readers locate information faster
- Documents are easier to update
- It is easier to train people
- Documents are more cost effective

As if those arguments are not enough, I might add this example from the Plain Language Web site. A study was conducted on a U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs benefits letter. It was estimated that in one year 750 copies of the letter were mailed. The letter was so confusing that it generated over 1,100 phone calls for clarification. After the letter was revised, 710 copies were sent out generating 200 phone calls---a dramatic decrease.

A similar scenario could easily happen at KDHE. Imagine you're asked to write a letter to partners across the state telling them to report statistics in a new way via the Internet. The letter is written by you and a co-worker. It is then given to your supervisor, who reviews it and passes it on to her supervisor, and then the director. After several rounds of revisions with every person's suggestions included, the letter is finally mailed out to thousands of partners across the state with new instructions. However, the letter is confusing and contradictory to the partners. The partners spend time with their staff trying to understand the new process, only to eventually become frustrated and flood the state office with phone calls asking for clarification. Staff at the state office are then pulled away from other work to talk with frustrated partners.

Because of a poorly worded, confusing letter, hundreds (and maybe thousands) of hours of staff, partner, customer time (which translates into money, and in our case---taxpayer money) is wasted. So, you can see how quickly poor communication can become a tangible business cost.

According to Plain Language, the battle for simplified language in government communication has been an ongoing issue. For instance:

- In the 1970s, President Nixon declared the Federal Register be written in "layman's terms."
- In 1978, President Carter issued executive orders to make regulations "cost-effective and easy to understand by those who were required to comply with them."
- In the 1990s, President Clinton issued a Presidential Memorandum requiring federal employees to write in plain language. He stated: "By using plain language, we send a clear message about what the government is doing, what it requires, and what services it offers...Plain language documents have logical organization; common, everyday words, except for necessary technical terms; 'you' and other pronouns; the active voice, and short sentences."

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In summary, E.B. White and William Strunk said it best: "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subject only in outline, but that every word tell."

Or, as Beatrix Potter said: **The shorter and the plainer the better.**

*In next month's Plain Language, we'll share tips on cutting unnecessary words from documents to help clarify and simplify messages. Have an example of confusing plain language? Send it to us: [Sherman@kdhe.state.ks.us](mailto:Sherman@kdhe.state.ks.us).*